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ABSTRACT

Musical improvisation behavior of 4-, 6-, and 8-year-old children who played Orff xylophones during ten 15-minute sessions is described in this paper. Each session involved three improvisatory phases. Phase I consisted of free exploration; Phase II consisted of short verbally stimulated musical tasks (two imitation and six improvisational tasks); and Phase III consisted of a folk song played by the investigator followed by improvisations by subjects while the investigator played a 24-measure bordun accompaniment. Each session was recorded, and improvisations from Phase III were isolated for analysis. Children's initial responses, their sequences of behavior, and the musical structure of their improvisations were analyzed. Among the results, it was found that the characteristics of children's improvisation change in relationship to the child's chronological age. Young children are able to improvise patterns which are related to melodic and rhythmic stimuli. Four- to eight-year-old children are able to form musical images to verbal stimuli. The 4-year-old child improvises complex rhythm patterns. Six-year-old and eight-year-old children maintain their interest in exploring the sound possibilities of a single instrument longer than four-year-old children. Between the ages of 6 and 8 children may improvise large formal structures. (Author/RH)

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MUSICAL IMPROVISATION BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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MUSICAL IMPROVISATION BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG CHILDREN

John W. Flohr

Many texts and reports dealing with music education advocate creative experience as an integral part of the music program. Leonhard and House (1972) are clear on this point:

> It seems obvious that all phases of the music education program would profit from real creative work in which composing, performing, and listening are combined into an integrated experience. This can be achieved by emphasis on improvisation or extemporization all along the line, from elementary school through the secondary school and beyond.

One would think that the special advantages of improvisation in the music education of children would generate an abundance of research projects. Methods have been designed to foster improvisation, but little is known about the characteristics of children's improvisations, children's reactions to improvisatory tasks, or the extent to which the improvisations of children differ.

The work of Pond and others at the Pillsbury Foundation (1978) is perhaps the earliest work in musical improvisation behavior of two to six-year-old children. In general, Pond found that young children were not predisposed to make pretty, symmetrical tunes, but rather patterns, shapes, and structures whose elements are rhythmic figures and intervals. Prével (1973; Gaudreau-Slater and Prével, 1978) observed three to thirteen-year-old musically naive children in a room with simple instruments and drawing materials. He found a narrow correlation between the children's musical development and the main stages of their motor, emotional, and mental development. After the children were able to control their movements, they began to experiment with timbre, vary dynamics, use accents, and construct conclusions and introductions.

This paper is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, "Musical Improvisation Behavior of Young Children" (University of Illinois at Urbana, 1979).

METHOD

The purpose of the study was to characterize and describe young children's improvisation behavior as they improvised on Orff xylophones during ten fifteen-minute sessions. Four four-year-old, four six-year-old, and four eight-year-old children participated in the study. Each child met individually with the investigator for ten fifteen-minute sessions and improvised with one mallet on a Studio 49 alto xylophone using a two-octave pentatonic scale comprising the pitches c, d, f, g, and a. Each session involved three improvisatory phases. During phase one, free exploration, each child was given the opportunity to explore the xylophone freely within the time limit of five minutes and thus develop manipulative techniques and explore the sound possibilities of the xylophone. Phase two, guided exploration, consisted of short musical tasks designed to give the child an opportunity to develop improvisatory responses and refine performance techniques. The short musical tasks included two imitation tasks (e.g., short melodic or rhythm patterns) and six improvisational tasks encouraging an improvised response (e.g., during "Conversations" the investigator and child pretended they were talking with the xylophones in a question-answer manner). During phase three, exploratory improvisation, the investigator played the folk song, "Hush Little Baby." Following completion of the folk song,the child was given the opportunity to improvise a melody while the investigator played a twenty-four measure bordun accompaniment using the rhythm, , on the pitches f and c. Each session was recorded and the improvisations from phase three, exploratory improvisation, were notated for subsequent analysis. The investigator analyzed the children's initial responses, sequences of behavior, and musical structure of the improvisations.

RESULTS

The study resulted in the production of minimally reduced records of children's improvisatory behavior. Each subject responded to the improvisatory tasks in his or her unique way, but several general patterns of behavior emerged. All the children exhibited a small amount of interest in dynamics and timbre probably as a result of the limitations of the xylophone. If the children had been given several instruments, they may have explored the dynamics and timbral possibilities of the different instruments.

During free exploration all the children used stepwise motion and repeated pitches to explore the entire range of the xylophone. Two of the eight-year-old children played tonally during their initial exploration. In subsequent sessions all of the eight-year-olds played tonal patterns which established that they were working within the f' tonal orientation, but only two six-year-olds and one four-year-old did so. The older children's explorations were consistently more patterned than the four-year-olds' explorations. All of the four-year-olds spent less time in free exploration during sessions 2-10 than in session 1. They became tired of free exploration in much the same way that young children become tired of a new toy. The older children's interest was maintained and they often played the xylophone for the full five minute time limit.

Three of the four children from each age group changed their musical responses in relation to the verbal stimuli of tasks from phase two, guided exploration. For example, when asked to play as if "mad," one four-year-old child responded with loud, steady, accented beating and added, "It sounds noisy." She changed to softer and faster playing when asked to play as if "glad." She responded to the stimulus "rain" by repeating a rhythm pattern but added, "It doesn't sound like that, It comes down." She played slowly and softly from the highest pitch of the xylophone down to the lowest pitch.

She responded to the stimulus "thunder" with a contrasting musical answer by playing a series of loud pitches and accelerating the tempo. During other tasks of phase two the eight-year-olds typically related their improvised responses to the melodic and rhythmic characteristics of the stimuli. For example, an eight-year-old often established inversion relationships between his responses and stimuli. The younger children's responses were initially unrelated to the stimuli, but in later sessions several of the younger children began improvising patterns which were related to the stimuli. The change in their behavior indicated a better understanding of the tasks and increased sensitivity to the melodic and rhythmic characteristics of the stimuli.

The four-year-olds spent less time playing the xylophone during the third phase in the later sessions, but the older children typically played the entire time the investigator played the bordun. Evidently, the four-year-olds became tired of exploratory improvisation. The older subjects played patterns which indicated that they were improvising within a tonal orientation more often than the four-year-olds. Quarter-note triplet rhythms against the quarter-notes of the bordun were characteristic of the four-year-olds improvisations, and the rhythms they improvised were often more complex than those improvised by the older subjects. The four-year-olds typically improvised rhythms which were different from the bordun rhythm (Figure 1).

Repetition and variation were common in the initial exploratory improvisations of the eight-year-olds and six-year-olds but not the four-year-olds. In subsequent sessions the older children's improvisations were more patterned than those of the four-year-olds, and the eight-year-olds often improvised large formal structures (Figure 2). Asymmetrical phrase length was most common in the younger children's improvisations.

Figure 1. Four-year-old's improvisation - fourth session*

Figure 2. Eight-year-old's improvisation - ninth session*

*Measures in which the child did not play exactly on the beat are indicated by broken bar lines.

The older children, however, conformed to the two-measure phrase structure of the bordun. The music improvised by the older children indicated that their perception had become decentered while the central concern of the four-year-olds apparently was what sounded pleasant at the moment rather than the overall formal structure.

DISCUSSION

What implications can be drawn for music education? First, the improvisations of young children can provide the music educator with a resource abundant with pedagogical possibilities. For example, the repetition and variation technique in a child's improvisation may be used to help teach the concepts of repetition and variation. Second, the characteristics of children's improvisation change in relation to the child's chronological age. The teacher may expect different musical techniques to be employed by children of different chronological ages. Third, young children are able to improvise patterns which are related to melodic and rhythmic stimuli. The teacher may wish to give children the opportunity to expand their response repertoire through repeated experiences with improvisational tasks. Fourth, four to eight-year-old children are able to form musical images to verbal stimuli. Tasks such as, "Play as if you are mad," may be a useful measure to initiate improvisation with young children. Fifth, the four-year-old child improvises complex rhythm patterns. The teacher may wish to encourage and nurture the young child's ability to perform complex rhythm patterns to enable the child to sustain his or her ability in later years. Sixth, the six-year-old and eight-year-old child maintains his or her interest in exploring the sound possibilities of a single instrument longer than the four-year-old child. The four-year-old

child's attention is focused on the sound itself. Later, between the ages of six and eight, the child may improvise large formal structures as his or her perception becomes decentered. The teacher may wish to consider the possibility of giving four-year-old children ample opportunity to explore a wide variety of sound sources and begin improvisatory training with six-year-old children. Finally, four, six, and eight-year-old children are able to freely improvise music which is unique. The teacher may wish to incorporate improvisatory opportunities into the music program in order to develop the individuality of free expression.

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